

NEEDS ANALYSIS AS THE FIRST STEP IN SYLLABUS DESIGN

'What is good for everything is good for nothing.' This is one of the maxims each of us ought to bear in mind, and it is applicable to all spheres of life, not excluding language pedagogy. Any foreign language program follows certain guidelines, be they the general curriculum of a state school, the language philosophy of a language teaching institution, or even the outline of private tuition for a single student. The guidelines should not, however, be formulated in an ad hoc and haphazard manner, resulting from the school's vague preferences, the instructor's favourite teaching techniques and activities, his/her methodological ignorance, or the uncritical following of the current vogue. Conversely, every language course (any course, in fact), be it general or restricted, ought to be consciously designed taking three points into consideration:

- who we teach
- how to teach

and, most importantly

- what to teach.

Going for the first textbook available, even when it has been widely recommended and highly appraised, may soon result in a pedagogical failure if the coursebook has been intended for a different age and occupation group (not to mention the language proficiency level) than our students, is based on a different language philosophy and theoretical framework and its teaching objectives and goals are divergent from ours. A notional-functional foreign language syllabus intended for secondary-school students cannot be deemed suitable for an executive demanding an intensive course in Business English or Wirtschaftdeutsch. The first step of every syllabus design should therefore be needs analysis, i.e. a set of techniques and procedures used for obtaining information about the learners and situations and purposes for which they want to learn the language.

Actually, it was not until the early 1980s that needs analysis became a recognised stage in the process of syllabus design. First restricted to ESP courses only, its use later gradually extended to cover general courses as well. Today the overwhelming majority of language courses is based on needs analysis.

Needs assessment requires the specific examining of both (a) the present situation and (b) the target situation. The former includes finding out the prospective or current learner's:

- social background (pair- or group work with students of a higher social status may be considered intimidating by some learners)
- educational background
- age and occupation
- former experience of and the present proficiency in the foreign language, but even more importantly the deficiencies and knowledge gaps between the target proficiency and the current proficiency of the learner
- preferred learning activities, methods, styles, and strategies
- availability (time constraints)
- aptitude for learning
- motivation.

The latter includes the learner's:

- immediate communicative needs
- learning goals; these may be considered on up to three levels which, if divergent or conflicting, should be successfully reconciled:
 - learner's wants and preferences (what the learner thinks s/he needs)
 - the expectations of the user institution (the university, employing company, etc.)
 - the general curriculum of the teaching institution (state/language school, university, etc.); this may also call for the need for a broader educational context analysis: the place of the FL in the school syllabus (in the case of state education), the duration and intensity of the course, the final exams (if present), classroom size, the resources available, etc.
- the expected standard of performance and linguistic correctness.

When going about the data collection, the following methods are usually used:

- questioning the learner himself/herself directly (by means of an oral interview or a written questionnaire); one must remember at this point, however, that an interview is highly subjective in the sense that the needs declared by the learners may be incongruous with the expectations of the future user institutions; moreover, many learners (young learners and teenagers in particular) lack clearly specified needs;
- consulting the learner's employer and colleagues;
- collecting and analysing data such as bulletins or manuals that the learners will have to read;
- investigation and observation of the situations in which the language will be used;
- discussion with teachers who have experience in handling similar courses;
- in order to assess the learner's current command of the language the teacher may also administer a placement test, interview the learner, or confine himself/herself to a review of the textbooks covered by the learner so far.

The data collected in this way will serve as the cornerstone, the starting point of designing a syllabus framework: formulating the goals of the course, determining its duration, intensity, and the teaching method (philosophy) applied (structural/situational/notional-functional/skills-based/combined), specifying the course objectives (defining the range of language tasks which the course graduates should be able to perform as a result of instruction) and standards of performance, and the selection, sequencing, and gradation of course content (i.e. situations/topics/themes/skills/functions/notions/language forms/tasks, etc.). This will eventually lead to the choice (or self-design) of suitable materials.

With this initial stage, which helps ensure that the course will be appropriate, effective, practical, and realistic, a course stands a good chance of being a success. The rest largely lies with the teacher.

Recommended further reading:

- Hutchinson, T., and A. Waters. 1987. *English for Specific Purposes: A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Komorowska, H. (ed.). 1984. *Wybrane problemy nauczania języków obcych*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne.
- Krahne, K. 1987. *Approaches to Syllabus Design for Foreign Language Teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Nunan, D. 1996. *Syllabus Design*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Valdez, M.G. 1999. 'How learners' needs affect syllabus design'. *English Teaching Forum* 37, 1, pp. 30-31.